DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 357 343 CS 213 795

AUTHOR Hassett, Michael J.
TITLE Constructing an Ethical Writer for the Postmodern Scene.
PUB DATE Apr 93
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communications (44th, San Diego, CA, March 31-April 3, 1993).
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom Use - Teaching Guides (For Teacher) (052) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Higher Education; Moral Values; *Reader Response; Reader Text Relationship; Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS *Author Reader Relationship; Authorship; Barthes (Roland); Burke (Kenneth); Composition Theory; Deconstruction; Foucault (Michel); *Postmodernism

ABSTRACT

The advent of postmodern criticism has brought about numerous changes in the way those in the academy read and teach the reading of texts. From Michel Foucault's "What is an Author?" to Roland Barthes' "The Death of the Author" and beyond, critics and theorists have sought to decrease the author-ity of the material that is read. In doing so, these writers have been justified by the view that the reader is as much a participant in the creation of a text as is the author; hence, the "tyranny" of the author as a monolithic source of meaning in a text--a tyranny previous critical methods have assumed--has been disputed by postmodern critics. The key to Kenneth Burke's methodology of response is the idea of the "other," a notion that has become extremely important in postmodern discursive theory. A theory and pedagogy of composition should be developed that will place an ethical responsibility upon the writer to enhance "response-ability," to create a space for response. In this way, the linguistic ideal of which Burke says ideal democracy is the institutional equivalent might be approached. The ethical postmodern writer, then, will be a person attempting to write in such a way that the reader is invited into the text's space as a full and equal partner in the meaning-making process. (SAM)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED357343

Constructing an Ethical Writer for the Postmodern Scene

presented at CCCC April 1, 1993
by Michael J. Hassett
Iowa State University
203 Ross Hall
Ames, IA 50011

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Michael Hassett

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)"

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
✓ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

The advent of postmodern criticism has brought about numerous changes in the way we in the academy read and teach the reading of texts. From Foucault's "What Is an Author?" to Barthes' "The Death of the Author" and beyond, critics and theorists have sought to decrease the author-ity of the material we read. In doing so, these writers have been justified by the view that the reader is as much a participant in the creation of a text as is the author; hence, the "tyranny" of the author as a monolithic source of meaning in a text, which previous critical methods have assumed, has necessarily been disputed.

Foucault undermines "the sovereignty of the author" which dominates literary criticism prior to postmodernism (126), and Barthes demonstrates that "the image of literature to be found in ordinary culture is tyrannically centered on the author, his person, his life, his tastes, his passions" ("Death" 143). The postmodern solution to this author-itarianism is the death of the author, thus the elimination of authorial control over the making of meaning.

Increasingly, this postmodern critique has taken the form of emphasizing the role of the reader to compensate for or to hasten the reduction or elimination of the author. Theresa Enos notes that "more and more we're hearing another slogan: The tyranny of the author has been replaced by that of the reader" (339). Deconstruction and postmodernism have allowed an antagonistic relationship between reader and writer to persist. And while the point of "killing off" the author was to bring the act of writing and reading closer together, that does not seem

CS213795

possible when the relationship between them is established as inherently antagonistic or competitive. Moreover, the postmodern idea that the author does not control her language, but that language controls her, has further vitiated the idea of author-ity: "Some say we do not speak language, but language speaks us" (Kraft 47).

In emphasizing the reader to the exclusion of the author, and in analyzing the way in which language can construct us, postmodern theories have done much for reading pedagogy but little for composition. Postmodernism has lead not only to the author's death, but also to the removal of responsibility from the writing act. Gregory Clark, who uses postmodern theory to examine discursive interaction, draws two revealing conclusions. First, Clark explains that "those who read texts rather than those who write them must carry the primary responsibility for seeing that writing functions ethically" (52). Second, "the writing of a text is an inherently unethical act that can be made ethical only through the judgment and response of those readers whose common interests it addresses" (61).

To develop a theory and pedagogy of composition within this postmodern condition, we need a perspective that will enable us to see some sort of ethical responsibility in the writer while still allowing the reader to participate in the meaning-making process. And this perspective has to place the author and reader in a relationship that is not agonistic. For me, one possible location of such a perspective is in the work of Kenneth Burke. I see Burke offering a methodology for writers to find their own useful place within the meaning-making interaction.

At this point I would have, had I the time, constructed a new notion of the writing subject based on Burke's definition of humans as symbol-using animals. Because time is short, I will simply presume a writing subject with some sense of agency (a presumption I recognize is extremely problematic). And I will proceed on the basis of that assumption to construct a writer's ethic.

Any new ethical framework that we attempt to construct must be fashioned along the lines of creating a space for both writer and reader (and thereby for all discursive actors)--allowing a meaning-making dialectic between them. As it is now, we have already seen the way in which what Burke calls the "primacy of the kill" has affected postmodern theories of reading: theorists feel "forced" to kill off the author in an attempt to free a space for the reader.

The same crowding that led postmodern theorists to kill off the author can be seen in the demographics of our contemporary scene. Our contemporary social context, unlike any previous, is best described by the word *diversity*: we have a diversity of origins, cultures, opinions, and needs. Within the United States, we are witnessing a diversification of our citizenry unlike anything we've seen before. Already we see an ethnic diversification within our schools and communities. America will never again (if, indeed, it ever was, and despite the attempts of some people to make it so) be a homogeneous Caucasian culture. According to Henry Cisneros, former mayor of San Antonio, Texas, "This new reality will change everything about society: Politics, industry, education, ethics" (15).

In essence, the modern demographic and the postmodern discursive scenes involve the same kind of Burkean wrangle: People are afraid that the reader's voice is not being heard, just as some communities are afraid their voices are not being heard, so those people decide that violence is the only available response, the only way by which they can "free up" a space for themselves. And while the postmodern kill is of a verbal sort, making it much better than the physical violence that might otherwise occur, it still seems that we could go one better and make it even more "purely" verbal and less violent. In doing so, we might stand a good chance of creating a much closer relationship between writer, reader, and text while eliminating any tyranny among them.

It is at this point that we might begin to construct some sort of ethical

relationship between the writer and reader. To do so we must bear in mind all three aspects of the scene in which we are developing the appropriate act(s). The ethical act for which we are looking must take into account the tremendous diversity of the people who are involved in discursive exchanges; it must allow for the working out of conflict in a verbal rather than a physical manner; and it must develop a relationship between writer and reader that removes the tyrannical function from either position. Essentially, what we need is a relationship of space--we need an ethic that can create space for our demographically crowded, socially pressed (and re-pressed) writer and reader to operate in.

These three scenic elements have one thing in common that might provide such a space: the need for *response*. Only through hearing their diverse responses can we recognize the diversity of the people around us. Only by allowing verbal response can we provide an outlet for people short of physical violence. Only through response can a reader make meaning from a text. And it is in his use and analysis of response that I think Burke can be most helpful for us in developing a sense of what might make for an ethical communicative act within the spatial confines of our contemporary scene as I've described it.

We might examine Burke's work with "response" by breaking it down into two related aspects--response and response-ability. Response would involve the nature and benefits of "response" as an aspect of human, hence symbolic, behavior. Response-ability would involve the ways in which writers can allow readers a greater opportunity for making a response.

I begin with Burke's notion of response, in general. In order to fully understand how important response is to an ethic of communication (or more specifically, of writing), we must understand how it is essentially bound up in our nature as symbol-using animals. Burke discusses response in his pseudo-drama "Prologue in Heaven" at the end of *Rhetoric of Religion*. As The Lord and Satan

discuss the plans for the symbol-using animal, they discuss the aspects of its character that will make it unique:

> TL. . . . Thus, note first of all, that purely by definition, the Word-Men, by being endowed with their particular kind of language (as the other animals are not) will have the power of answering questions or responding to commands. . . .
>
> S. But everything "responds." If an Earth-Man kicks one of his pebbles, it will "respond" to the impetus of his blow.
>
> TL. The Pebble will not say a word.
>
> S. *Touche'!* "Response" in the full sense of the term involves "symbolicity." (280)

The ability to respond "in the full sense of the term" is fundamentally involved with our nature as symbol-using animals. And our ability to respond symbolically is also our highest ability and our highest priority.

In *A Rhetoric of Motives*, Burke develops a methodology of response. The methodology is prompted by Burke's discussion of the way in which our terminologies (or "terministic screens") can blind us to alternative viewpoints. "A human terminology of motives [or of any subject]," Burke explains, "is necessarily partial; accordingly, whatever its claims to universal validity, its 'principles' favor the interests of some group more than others; and one may look to opposing theorists for discoveries that 'unmask' the partisan limitations lurking in speciously 'universal' principles" (198). Parker J. Palmer, an educational theorist, can illuminate this Burkean notion for us:

> In the personal mode of knowing and teaching we must always be aware of the other's nature. . . .which is sometimes darkened by ignorance or prejudice or greed . . . *Of course, our own nature may be as dark as the other's. So we must allow the other to speak back to us, not*

> *in conformity to what we want to hear, but in fidelity to the other's truth.* (90, emphasis mine)

Burke echoes this effect of response as he discusses our need for allowing others to "correct" our symbol using. Burke's methodology allows a person to "discount the partiality of his own position somewhat" by allowing others to respond: "contributing specialists might contribute by unmasking the undetected partiality of their colleagues, thereby making it possible to work steadily towards an increase in the exactitude of ways for discounting bias in views that *had seemed to be universally valid*" (*R of M* 198, emphasis mine). We cannot always recognize our own blind spots, hence we need the response of others to do that for us.

The human ability to deviate is the ability that "sets us free." It is this same ability, however, that leads us to our need to be corrected by others. Burke explains this through The Lord in "Prologue in Heaven":

> TL. . . . In dealing with ideas one at a time (or, as they will put it, "discursively") they can do many things which can't be done when, like us, all ideas are seen at once, and thus necessarily corrected by one another. (282)

Humans are temporal beings--they "see" things one at a time, one after another--and they are spatial beings--they see what is closest, then farther, and so on as they look across a particular scene. It is this aspect of our human nature that leads us to be blinded, since we can only "see" one thing at a time. If we were, as TL mentions, non-temporal beings, we could hold in our view all things at once, which would allow our perspective to be self-correcting. Since we cannot do that, we have to use a perspective other than the one we currently hold to act as a corrective.

Our ability to act symbolically will allow us to correct ourselves to a certain extent (as we move through time and space we can gain other perspectives which will allow us to correct previous "errors"). But in order to develop a thorough

critique of our current perspectives, we must utilize the views of others, others who are located in their own particular time and place. It is only through response that we are able to do this, and it is only by creating a space for ourselves and for others that we allow response.

The importance of response has been developed in a number of contemporary theoretical fields, including rhetoric, psychology, philosophy, and others. Feminism has contributed much to this discussion of response and "the other" in all of these fields, and I think that this feminist thought can be helpful in expanding Burke's work. Nel Noddings, in her book *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics & Moral Education*, uses the idea of response to build her ethical/caring ideal. Noddings emphasizes "the central importance of dialogue in nurturing the ethical ideal" (121). Her ethics develop the centrality of dialogue by being based upon the notion that "the ethical ideal of one-caring is built up in relation. It reaches out to the other and grows in response to the other" (81). This seems to enhance the ethical nature of Kenneth Burke's idea as we are here discussing it. Burke is essentially developing a communicative ethic of caring--caring about what the other has to say in response to our communicative acts. And Noddings stresses, as do Burke and Palmer, that our own difficulties, our own blind spots, can be "corrected" or "discounted" by the voice of the other: "I shall claim that we are dependent on each other even in the quest for personal goodness. How good *I* can be is partly a function of how *you*--the other--receive and respond to me" (6).

If we are to build a contemporary ethical position, then it seems that we need to do so by encompassing the response of the other, of our "audience" to put it in the traditional terms of composition, but an audience that is now an active participant in the discursive process.

The key to Burke's methodology of response is the idea of the "other," a notion that has become extremely important in postmodern discursive theory. The

goal of Burkean response might be stated as "a series of devices whereby one deliberately gave voice to the opposition" (*LSA* 367). Kenneth Burke's educational project as described in "Linguistic Approach to Problems of Education," is based on the assumption that "one wants to be affected by" the other (284). And the purpose of this desire to be affected is that "one hopes for ways whereby the various voices, in mutually correcting one another, will lead toward a position better than any one singly" (284). This is the Burke that Tilly Warnock seems to have in mind when she says, "Mead emphasizes the encompassing of the other, whereas the followers of Piaget often stress the de-centering of the self to accommodate the other; Burke explores the reciprocity between self and other" (74). Working in conjunction with the other, we are able to mitigate our own blindnesses and achieve together something more than we might have achieved separately. This occurs only as we affect one another, as we both respond, and it becomes mutually enhancing--together we make meaning in a dialectical relationship of response.

What Burke's method for using response, for re-envisioning our situation in the terms of the "other," leads us to is the notion of "response-ability". Response-ability refers to the idea that as writers we have an obligation to ensure that our readers are *invited* to respond. Kenneth Burke's own writing project is designed to accomplish this very thing. Tilly Warnock's article "Reading Kenneth Burke: Ways In, Ways Outs, Ways Roundabout" is about "how [Burke] invites readers to participate in the symbolic action, in the dancing of attitudes" (62). Burke writes this way as part of a grand plan to ensure that "in the end there is no end to the conversation" (Williams 218). For Burke, the response(s) cannot end until "all the returns [are] in" (*R of M* 199). And that means, given our nature as symbol-using animals, that the conversation cannot end without all of us ending, as well.

Here our Burkean writer seems to meet up with the writer pictured by the early Barthes. This is the writer of "texts" rather than of "works." Barthes' "text . . .

asks the reader for active collaboration" ("From Work" 80). This text "is read without the father's signature" and, as a result, the writer comes into the text "as a 'guest,' so to speak" (78). This seems very close to the ethical picture which we are here establishing. Both the writer and reader meet together within the text to construct meaning from the discursive interaction, with neither person having control over that interaction. So we might picture our Burkean writer as a writer of "texts."

This becomes the general shape of our ethical writing within an always more crowded postmodern scene. We must find methods that will allow the space necessary for a never-ending conversation, a conversation in which the writer does not try to kill the reader or the text, and vice versa. We should seek methodologies that will create a dialectical relationship between writer and reader that will "play up" their differences, their divisions, in such a way that they lead to a greater possibility for unity; these methods will enhance the divisions that exist within our contemporary scene and at the same time provide a useful way to bridge those divisions.

We should seek an approach to writing that will place an ethical responsibility upon the writer to enhance "response-ability," to create a space for response, in order to increase the opportunity to have our blind spots removed or our darker natures illuminated. And in this way, we might approach the linguistic ideal of which Burke says ideal democracy is the institutionalized equivalent: "*ideal* democracy does allow all voices to participate in the dialogue of the state, and such *ideal* democracy is the nearest possible equivalent to the linguistic ideal" ("Linguistic Approach" 285). Our ethical postmodern writer, then, will be a person attempting to write in such a way that the reader is invited into the text's space as a full and equal partner in the meaning-making process.